If you live in the West Kootenay valley, then you've seen the Trail Metallurgical Operations Plant owned by Cominco. Cominco is a huge integrated smelter and refinery producing zinc, lead, silver, several other metals, and incongruously, fertilizer. You've heard the stories of a subterranean gold-filled vault, heavy water for the Manhattan Project and a dispute between Canada and the USA over air pollution. All of these are facts not fiction.

"Smelter Smoke in North America: The Politics of Transborder Pollution" by John D. Wirth, published in 2000, examines the story of Cominco's atmospheric emissions. Wirth is a history professor at Stanford and a White House appointee serving on the NAFTA Commission for Environmental Cooperation. His scholarly, thorough book leads through a maze where grassroots public action, corporate interests, government involvement, and science intertwine. These strands strain the balance between economic needs, protecting citizens' health and the cross-border issues between Canada and the USA. Wirth describes the evolution of accepting environmental protection as a legitimate, necessary cost of business. He provides examples of resistance to this perspective and some erratic progress towards sustainable development.

The conflict began in 1925 when sulphur dioxide emissions flowed south from Cominco damaging crops and forests in Washington state. Cominco accepted responsibility, was willing to compensate, but stalled over how much to pay and for what claims. When Canadian landowners made similar complaints, Cominco bought their land. Washington law forbid foreign land ownership so a different resolution was needed. The issue passed to the federal governments. The Canadian government, for decades, had supported Cominco in its consolidation and strengthening of regional refining and smelting. However, Canada didn't want to offend the Americans because she wanted their cooperation with the St. Lawrence Seaway project. The matter passed to the International Joint Commission (IJC). The US government initially had the US Bureau of Agriculture defend the complaint, but later file was passed to the US Bureau of Mines. This had a profound effect on the outcome.

In 1931, the IJC awarded a $350,000 decision to the complainants, but Cominco was not ordered to cease damaging emissions. The amount was less than sought. The US rejected the ruling and a tribunal was appointed to settle the dispute. In 1938 the tribunal upheld the IJC's decision, but granted a further $78,000 to the complainants. The tribunal ordered Cominco to install scrubbers on chimneys, to recover sulphur and to limit production when air pollution concentration exceeded critical levels.

Cominco, meanwhile, had realized that sulphur dioxide was valuable. Research staff devised means to use sulphur dioxide profitably to manufacture fertilizer. By 1937, Cominco's sulphur dioxide emissions fell from 1,000 to 350 tons per day, while zinc and lead production rose as did profits.

The story is complex. The dispute led to a scientifically flawed practise of compensating landowners only when their forests and crops displayed visible injury. Texas oil companies saw Cominco as a new and unwelcomed competitor in the chemical fertilizer industry. Canadian and American industries in the east became conscious of the impact of emissions. The case set precedents for a major US - Mexican dispute. An American smelter in New Mexico processed ore from mines across the Mexican border. By 1985 an area between New Mexico and Mexico was receiving 1.1 million tons of uncontrolled sulphur dioxide emissions annually. There were impacts on land, crops and human health. The Trail dispute, which largely favoured the polluter, was critical in a settlement of this issue.

If this chronicle was a Hollywood fantasy, the villains would admit their errors, amend their ways and walk into a sunset unobstructed by a haze of air pollution. Short-sightedness continues to imperil the environment and our health. Environmental protection has won some battles, but a final resolution balancing environmental and economic needs remains a distant hope.